

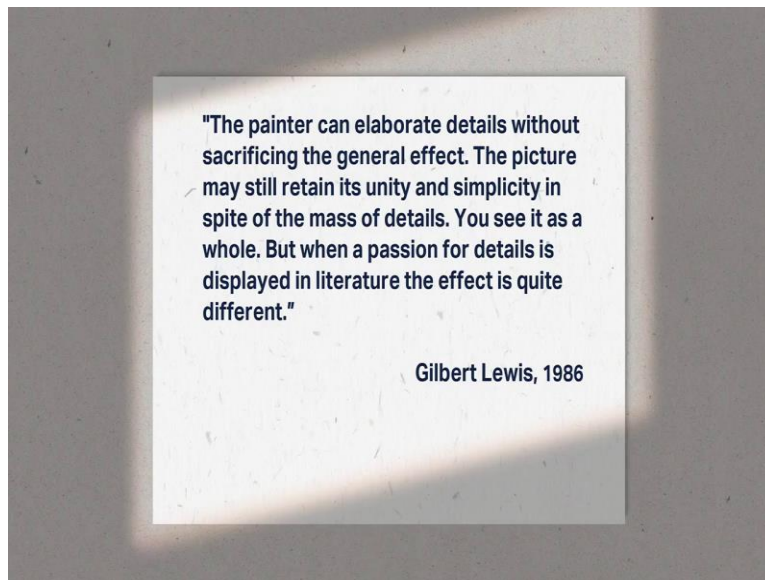
**Understanding Ethnography**  
**Module 7 Section 6**  
**Representation Through Visuals**

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And now, we come to one of the most interesting aspects of visual ethnography: representation or presentation of our ethnographic knowledge through visuals. This is where to use the analogy of text; we write our research output using visuals and images. As with any ethnographic text, our visual representations need to incorporate certain fundamental characteristics.

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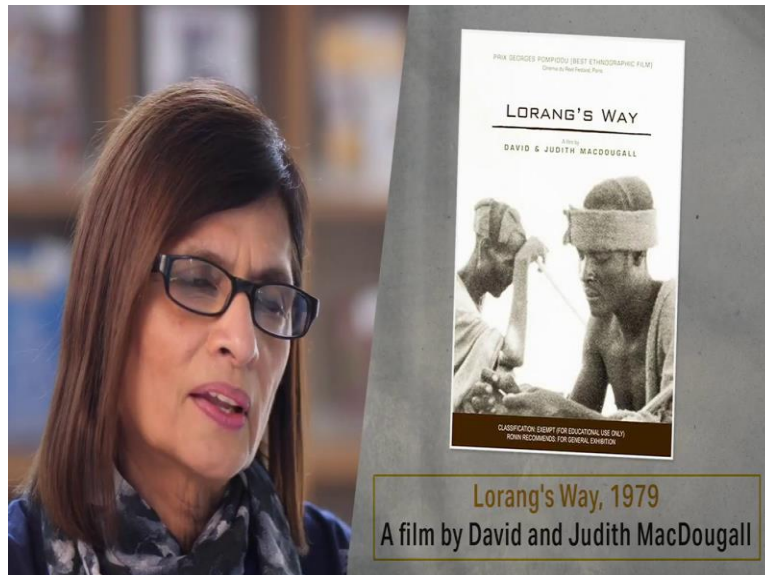
Constructing such representations requires a keen understanding of meanings embedded in the visuals we create and the media we use. We need to learn to 'read' the images we create. And to learn the grammar and language of our chosen visual media. Each visual medium has its own grammar. It uses certain visual and narrative devices which viewers learn to read and interpret for meaning.

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Films, for instance, use metaphor, sequencing and juxtaposition of images to convey stories, concepts and ideas. As an example, we have for you a clip from a film by David and Judith MacDougall.

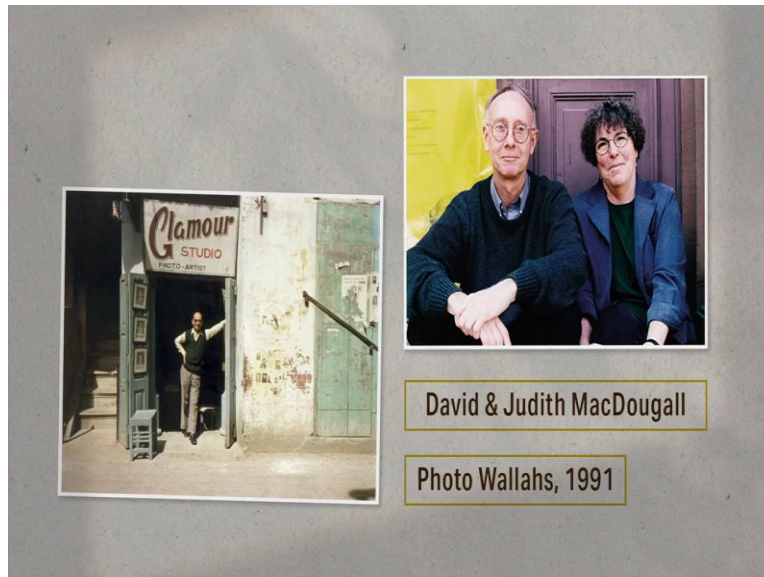
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You may remember the MacDougall's from our earlier module, where we had watched an excerpt from their film, Lorang's Way. They use film as a way to record and represent their ethnographic engagements. Since the late 1960s, they have been making ethnographic films and

are considered pioneers in the field. David MacDougall is also an academic and has written extensively on the visual ethnography. You can learn more about their work at this link.

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The clip we are about to see is from their film, the Photo Wallahs: An encounter with photography in Mussoorie, a north Indian hill station. The film is an exploration of the many meanings people associate with photography. The film is composed of observations and conversations with photographers and photography enthusiasts in Mussoorie and Dehradun.

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The sequence begins with an older woman and her companion making photographs of graves in a wooded cemetery. The graves are old, and the encryptions on the epitopes can barely be read. The woman participant narrates a small anecdote to the filmmakers about falling into an empty grave.

[Video The Photowalas shown 02:37 to 04:39]



Woman participant: I do not think the ant will come here. Except that, is gone too, has not it?

Filmmaker: This is gone.

Woman participant: Yes, okay. And it has got some sun on it too, which is good. In 60s, oh, that is too recent, too modern. Oh, I fell into a grave in Dehradun, one of the year 1830s or something.

Filmmaker: What happened?

Woman participant: Well you see, these very old graves with very big architecture of structures you know, on top. What happens is, they are kind of balanced across the opening of the grave that animals have dug in. So your one leg went right in, and underneath the grave, total vacuum, nothing there, marvellous for creatures.

Woman participant: Oh, that is good. They have received two reports from Doctor Coley. One on the Dehradun cemetery and the one on the Indian Christian cemetery and Doctor Coley has reported that they are very pleased, and it has led them to think about a booklet on cemeteries of India. So they will need pictures.

And what are these pictures and help from Baxar, who have, they have taken a lot of photographs all around India, you know. They could produce quite a nice little intake booklet on cemeteries. Whoever wants to read it, I cannot imagine, but it will be a record, heritage record.

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This sequence is followed by another featuring another old woman, someone who is possibly connected to the family, whose name appears on one of the old gravestones.

[Video shown 04:50 to 07:14]



Photo Wallahs 1991



Photo Wallahs 1991

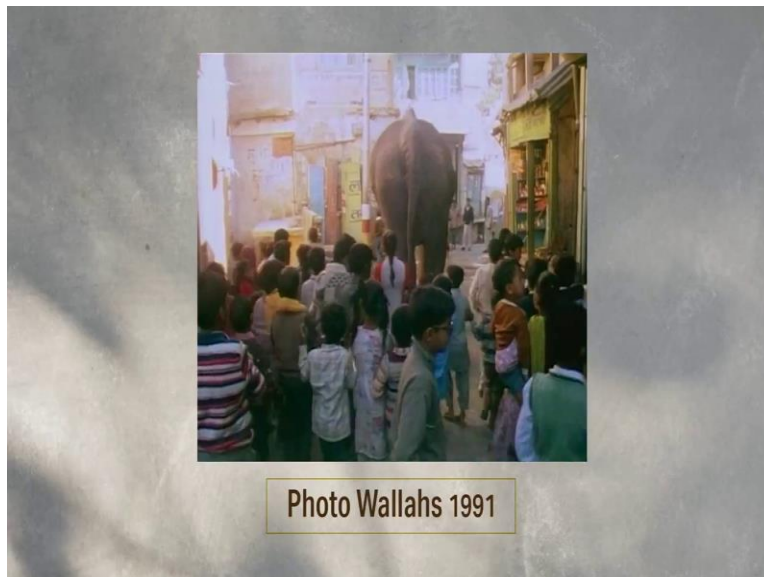
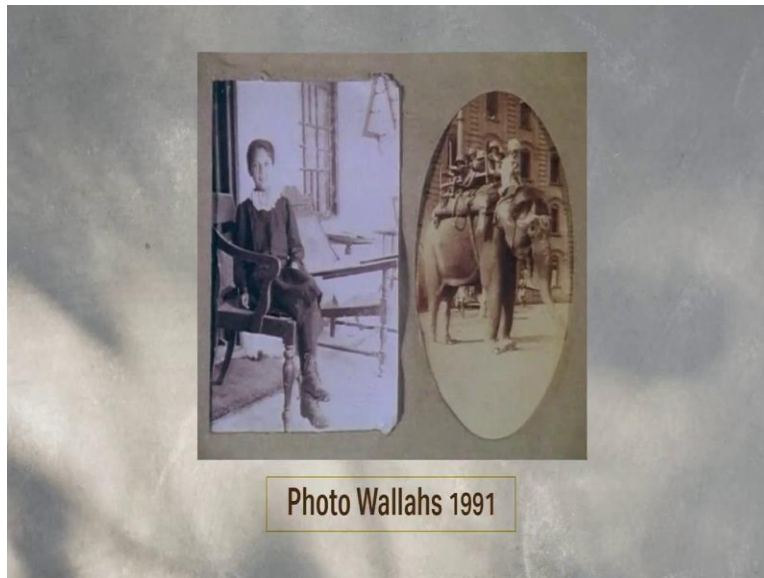


Photo Wallahs 1991



Photo Wallahs 1991





Old woman: This is my cousin, my only living relative in England. The one with the child standing on the railing is Ereth Goliv with her cousin Ray. Ray Morclue her name is.

Filmmaker: Is that a different Ereth?

Old woman: No, the same Ereth. I shall. Ereth is very fond of keeping chickens at one time. She kept Australorp and Rhode island reds And here she is feeding her Australorp. The Goliv's were very fond of keeping cats. So that is one of their many cats.

Person 1: Do not remember his name?

Old woman: I do not remember his name. No. That is a long table where the television tower before the television towers. The highest peak in Mussoorie. that is why we have climbed up the tree, to be higher than anyone else. I suppose I am about 10 or 11 years old in that picture. The elephant is in near . And the cousins are riding on the elephant, the little cousins.

Person 1: And yourself?

Old woman: I am not on the elephant. I do not know I may be on the elephant. I think only the children are on the elephant.

Professor: And the sequence ends with photographs of missing persons shown on the state's television.

[Video shown 07:21 to 09:53]

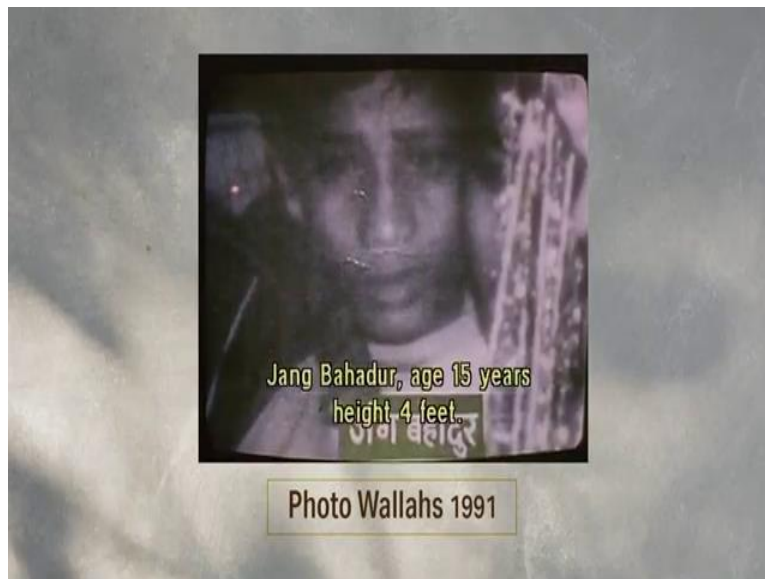




Photo Wallahs 1991



Photo Wallahs 1991

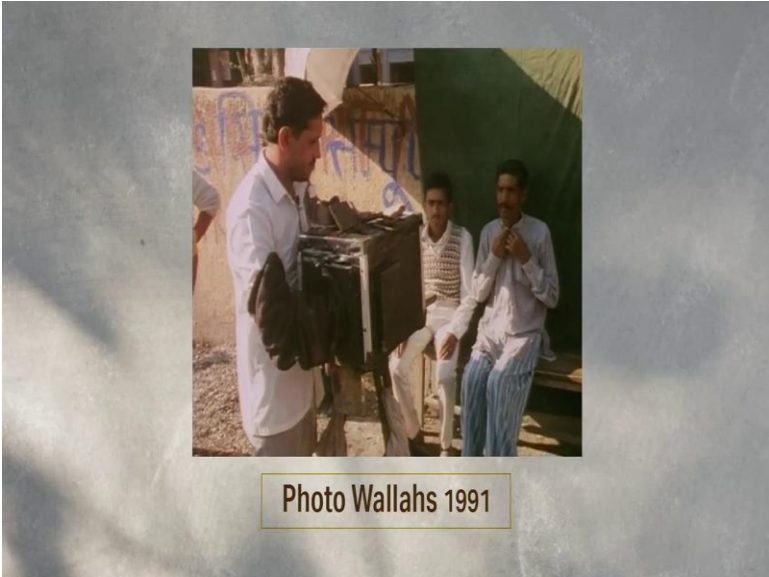


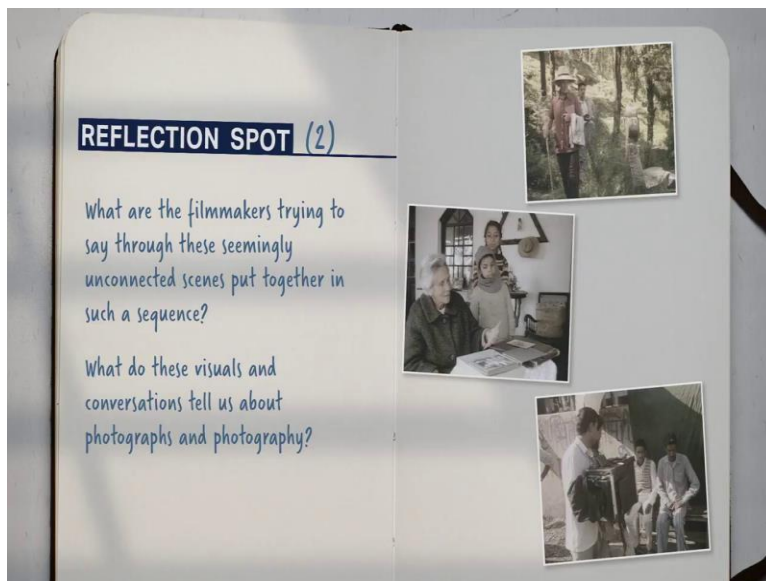




Photo Wallahs 1991

[Hindi Audio]

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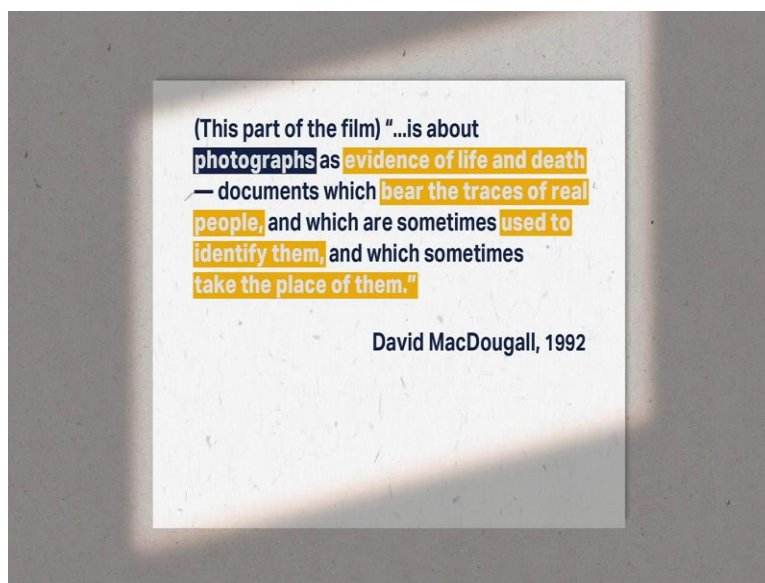
Now, what are the filmmakers trying to say through these seemingly unconnected scenes put together in such a sequence? And what do these visuals and conversations tell us about photographs and photography? Can you think about this and write down your answers.

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Some of you may have said the sequence conveys the feeling of losing someone or something. Others may have said that the visuals and anecdotes in this sequence, all link photographs with memory. These are both possible interpretations of the sequence. The photographs featured in the different scenes stand-in for those who are absent. They help people remember and identify those who are lost to them.

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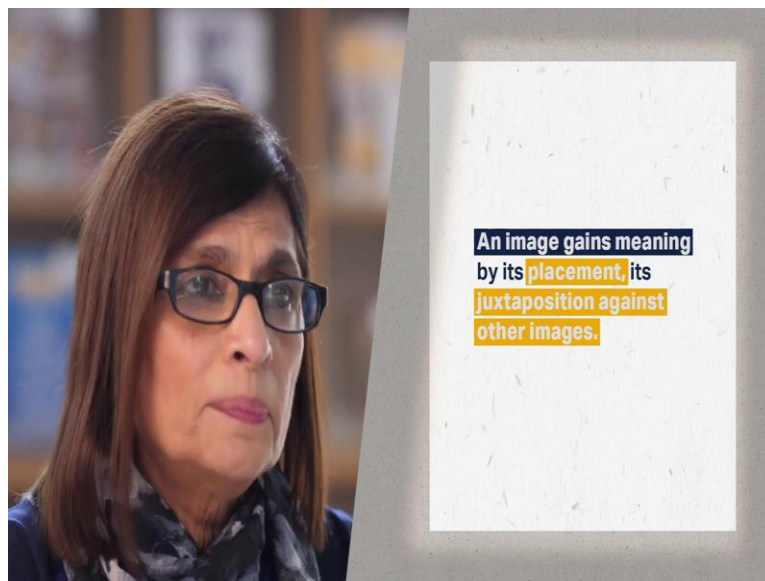


According to David MacDougall, this part of the film is about photographs as evidence of life and death. Photographs are acting documents which bear the traces of real people and which

marks the presence of their absence. This meaning, the association of photographs with memory and identification is conveyed in the film by the careful placement of one scene next to another.

For instance, the anecdote about falling into an empty grave, tells us little about photography. However, it is part of a sequence that speaks about memory and absence. And it appears within a scene that is about photography of cemeteries.

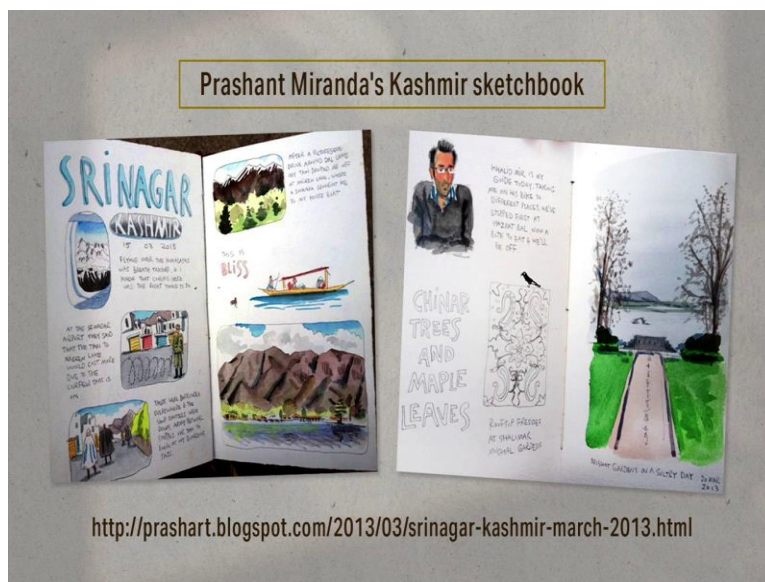
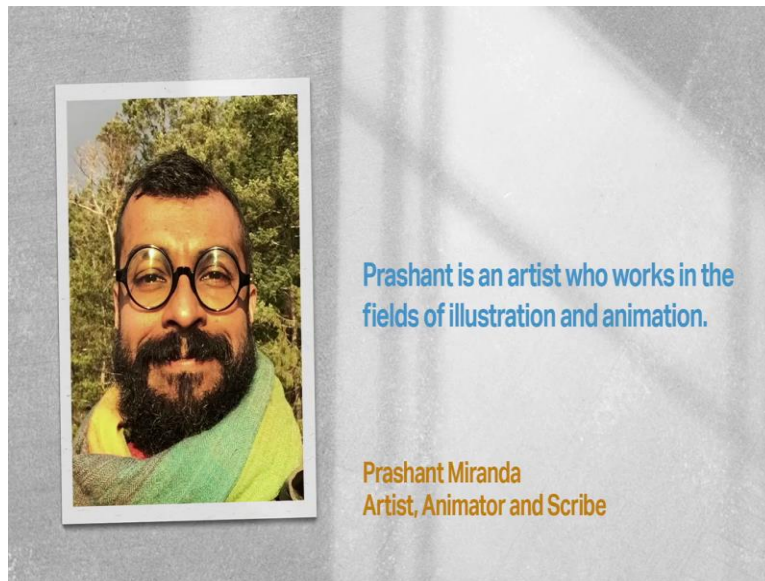
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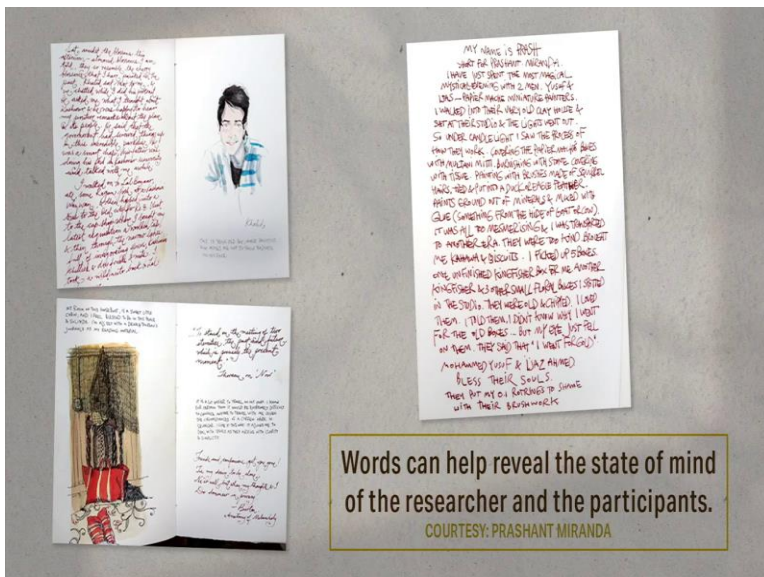
. Placed in this context, this anecdote deepens the sense of absence that is prevalent throughout the sequence. The emptiness of the grave that she speaks about becomes a profound metaphor for

absence and points to the task of the photograph as something that records absence. And so we see, visuals become metaphors. By arranging visuals, juxtaposing them around one another, we are able to express complex meanings and ideas. Let us look at another example of visual metaphors and juxtaposing, this time using images and text.

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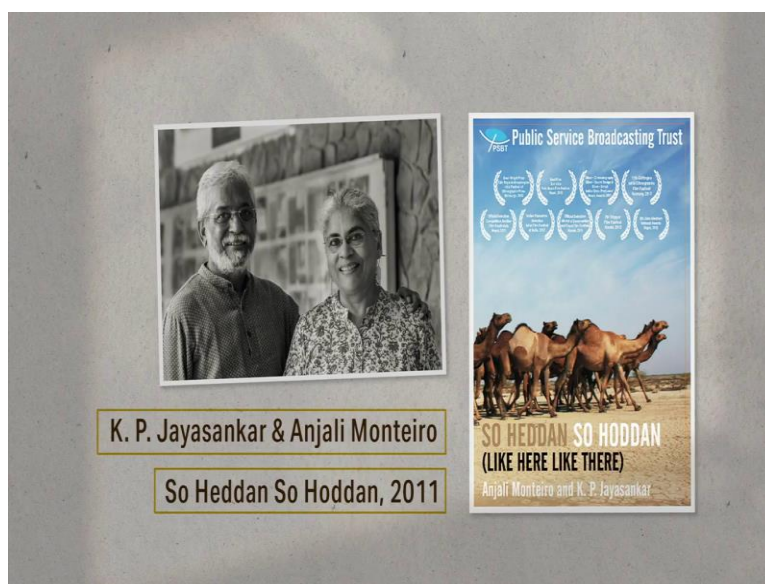
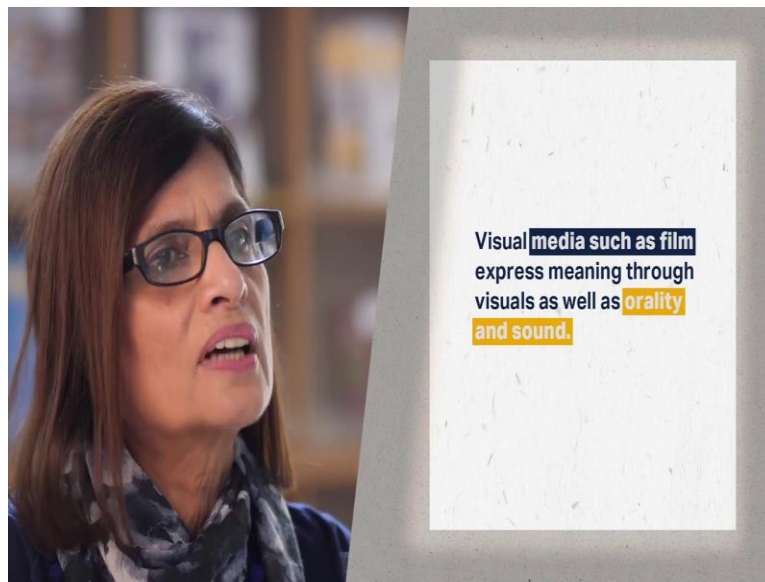




For this, we return to the work of Prashant Miranda, the visual artist. Here we have another of his sketchbooks, this one recording his travels in Kashmir. In Prashant's work, words are more than just explanatory captions for the sketches. They express the state of mind of the observer and place us the viewer in the context. By writing himself into his observation, Prashant makes himself and his interpretations visible.

In this work, just like in Photowalas, images are juxtaposed against each other to suggest meaning. And words are juxtaposed against images to convey the many layers of the artist's experience. You can see some more of Prashant's sketchbook in this link. In any medium, we construct meaning and convey ideas through the narrative and sequentiality of our visuals. We can work with still images, or moving ones, with sketches, video recordings or photographs with visuals alone, or with visuals and text.

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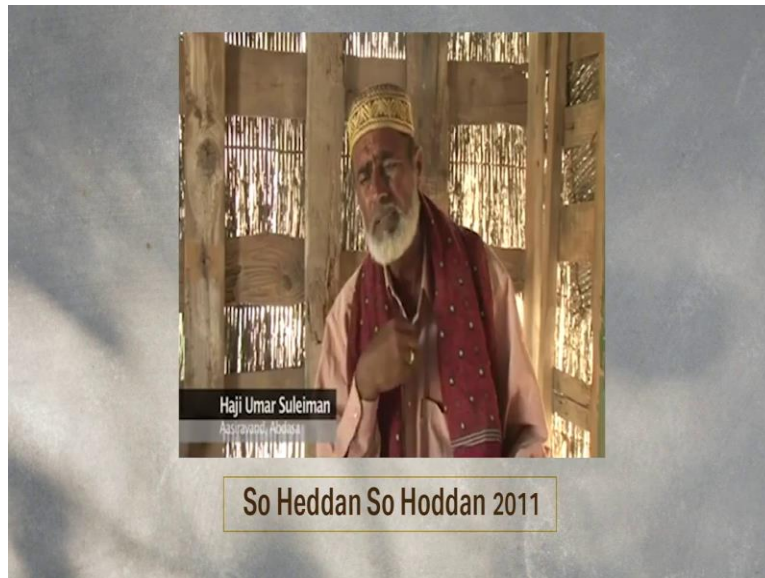


And in the case of film, the visual is accompanied by the oral and by sound. As an example of this, let us watch this clip from a film by Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar. This is an excerpt from their film, So Heddan So Hoddan.

[Video shown 13:34 to 15:46]



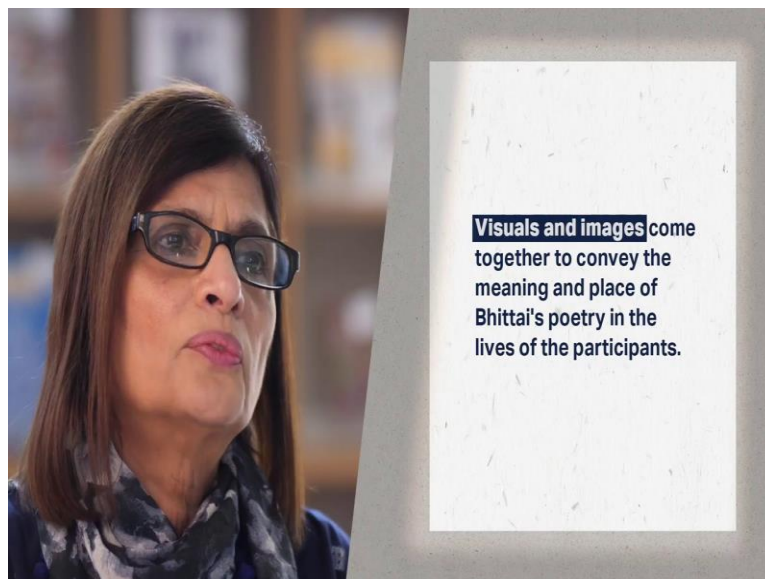




(Haji Umar Suleiman talks in Hindi language)

The film is about the lives and the music of the pastoral tribes of the Rann of Kutchh. It speaks about the importance that they attach the poetry and philosophy of the Sufi saint Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai.

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In the sequence we just watched, the visuals and the singing together established the theme and the central premise of the film. They emphasize the place of music and the words of the spiritual masters in the lives of the participants.

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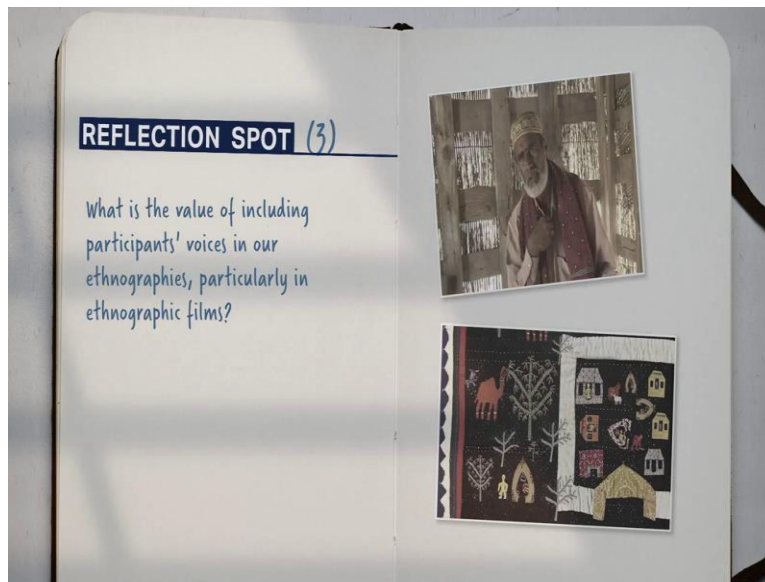
As seen in this sequence, through the visual medium of film, we can bring the voices of our participants into the representations that we construct.

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Take, for example, *The Stitches Speak*. The narrative of the film is based on the voices of the artists as they narrate their experiences.

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Let us pause here for a moment and reflect on our discussion so far. What is the value of including the participants' voices in our ethnographies, particularly in ethnographic films? Note down your answers to this question. Some of you may have said that it brings credibility to our representations.

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Others may have said that it makes the representation more detailed and descriptive. These answers are acceptable. Some of you may have pointed out that it makes our ethnographic engagements more equal and nuanced. This answer is correct.

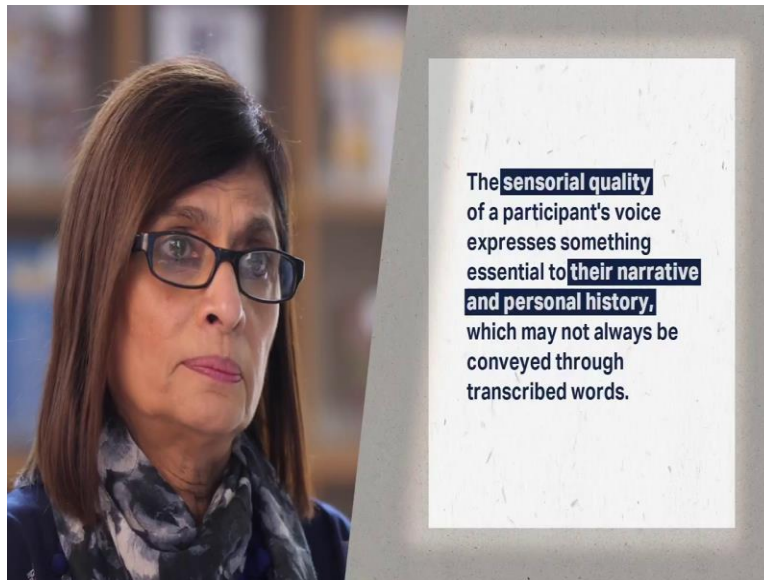
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Including the voices of our participants in our representations is one way to bring their subjectivity into our research. It can ensure that they have greater control and ownership over their narratives.

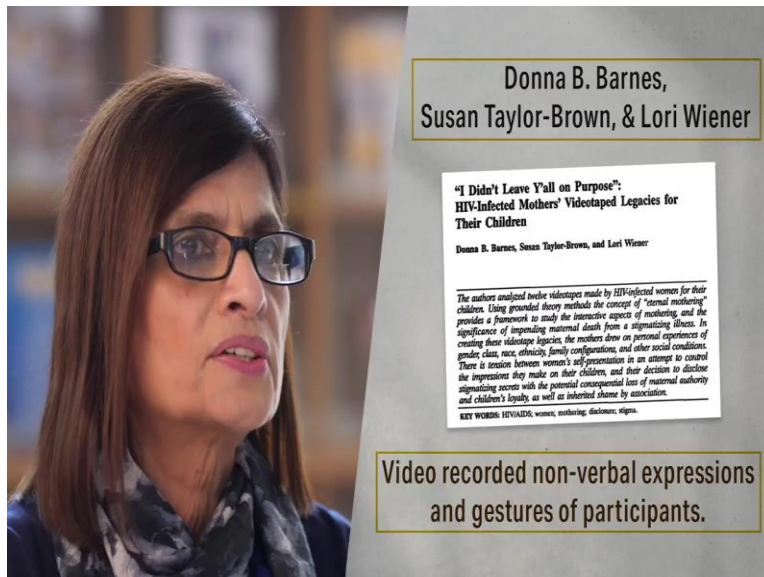


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And in audio-visual medium, such as film, there is also the sensorial quality of the voice. The sound of the participants' voice is just as important as the words they speak. Sound carries with it all the markers of the participant's history and identity - regional, socio-economic and cultural. It expresses the emotions that accompany their words and silences.

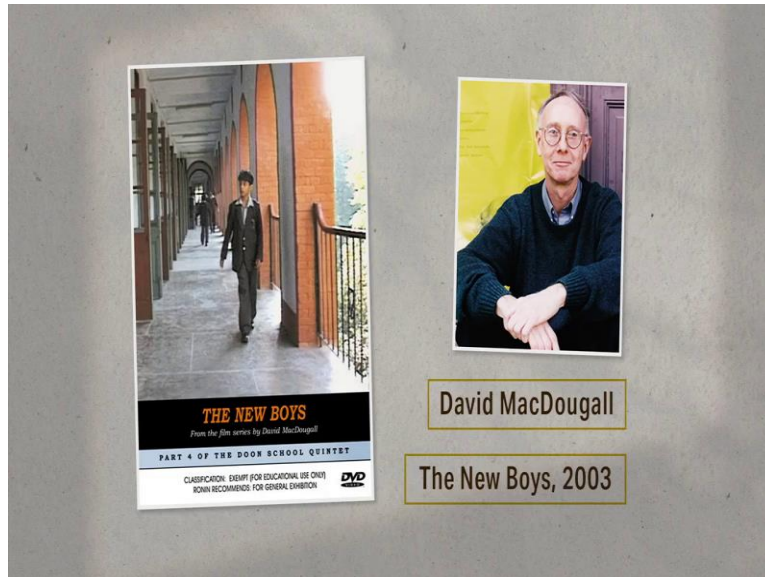
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Think back to an example we had discussed earlier in this module, the work of Donna Barnes with women infected with HIV. You would recall that one of the reasons that the women chose video as a recording medium was because it would carry their complete bodily expressions and

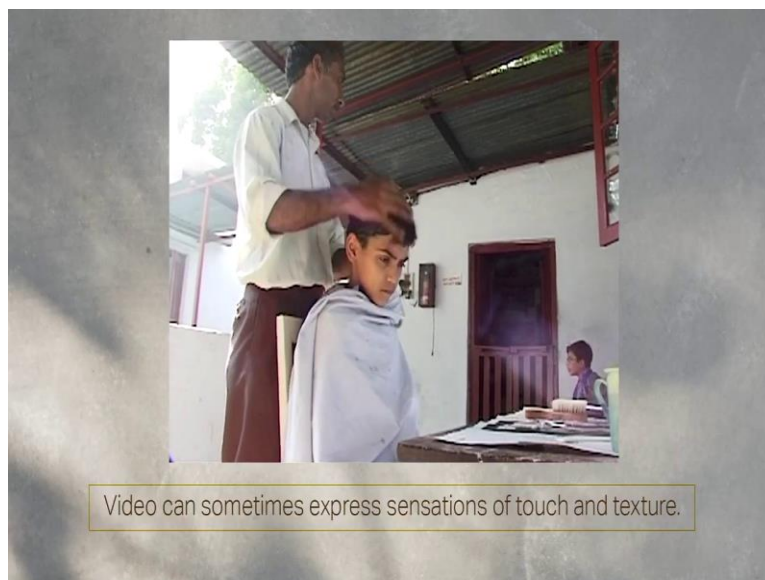
not only their words. And it is not only sound or words; visual representations also bring in other sensorial modalities of touch, smell and taste

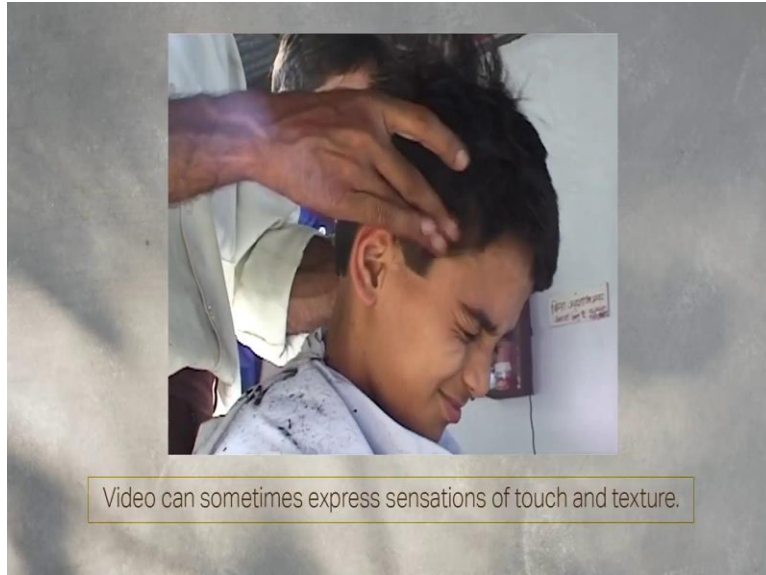
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like in this excerpt from another film by David MacDougall.

[Video shown 18:39 to 21:49]





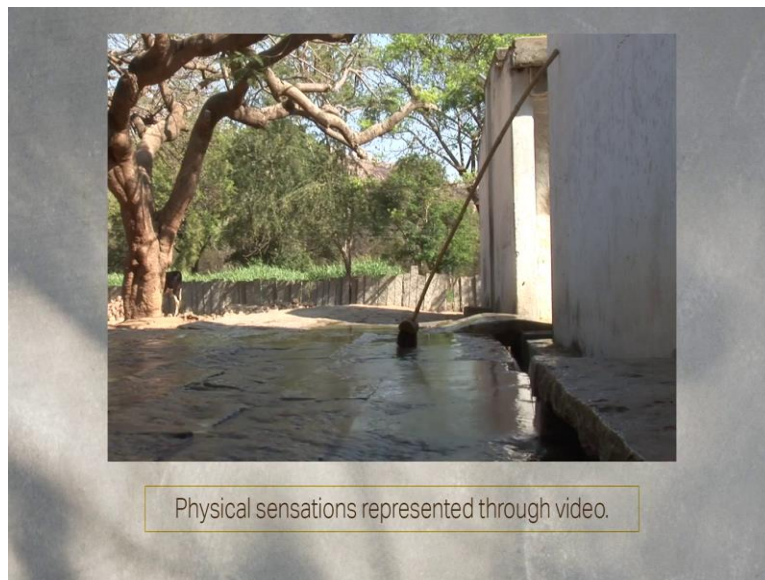
Sure, it is only sound and image, but viewing this scene, we experience the physical contact, the texture, the sensation of touch, that is part of getting a haircut. Having experienced a haircut, or a similar physical contact, we are able to understand the sensations of touch and texture that are depicted here through image and sound.

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Let us dwell on this point a little bit more with this scene from the film Schoolscapes. The film is MacDougall's exploration of life and learning in the Rishi Valley School in south India.

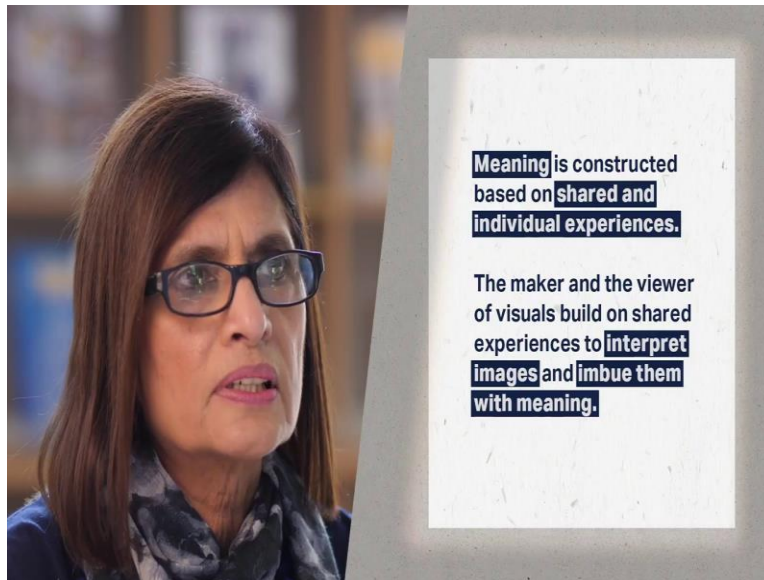
[Video shown 22:29 to 24:10]



Here too, the composition of visuals and sounds evokes a physical sensation that of flowing water of something being washed clean.



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Our understanding of visuals is at the level of experience and at the level of interpretation. The maker of the visual and the viewer work together, experiencing and interpreting what they see. Meaning is constructed based on shared and individual experiences. And so, a visual is more than just scene. Through a visual, we can experience touch, texture, sound, movement, smell and any number of sensations. Visual ethnographies we might say are not only visuals but multi-sensorial in nature.

In visually representing our research, we often try to present our participant's ways of scene. These ways of scene may be very different from ours. Visual media, particularly drawing and animation films, are able to represent different ways of seeing because they are not so dependent on 'realistic portrayals'. Sometimes these attempts at presenting the other's way of seeing may take the form of a collaboration between the researcher and the participant. In *The Stitches Speak*, for instance, the worlds created by the artists follow a visual and spatial logic that is unique.

[Video shown 25:41 to 26:05]



The placement of objects, people and animals depict a way of seeing, that is different from a more commonly seen way of drawing where usually all the figures are placed upright.

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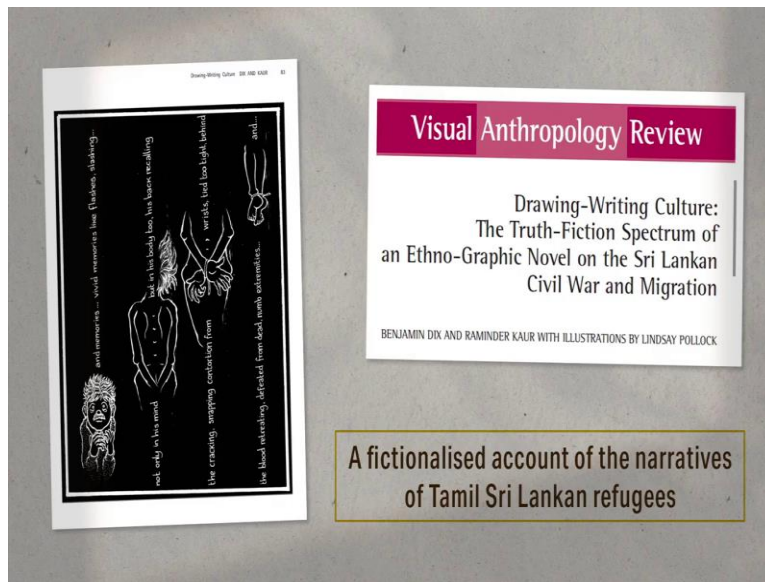


Drawing and animation filmmaking allows us to manipulate their canvases and their perspectives to depict these alternative visions of reality. And through this, we attempt to present our participants' ways of representing their verse. In the beginning of this section, we had spoken about the grammar of the visual and visual media.

Different participants and communities too have different visual languages. Sometimes their grammar is so different from what we are used to, that it pushes us to question our own ways of seeing and representing. By representing multiple ways of seeing, visual media are able to convey the constructed nature of reality. Visual ethnographers sometimes like to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction, to challenge the idea of objective depiction. By bringing fictional narratives, or alternative tellings, together with documentary ones, visual representations are able to present diverse versions of reality. This includes realities that are not visible per se, such as imaginations and memories.



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Memories and dreams form an important part of the ethnography of the graphic novel memories of the Vani, which present the story of Tamil refugees effected by conflict in Northern Sri Lanka.

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The ethnography depicts the experiences of refugees during the war and afterwards as they wait to be granted asylum. It represents their lived experiences through fictionalised accounts based on anecdotes, dreams and memories narrated by the participants. The characters portrayed in this work are fictionalised. The fictionalisation of narratives empowers the participants by making their stories visible, while also protecting their safety by anonymising them.

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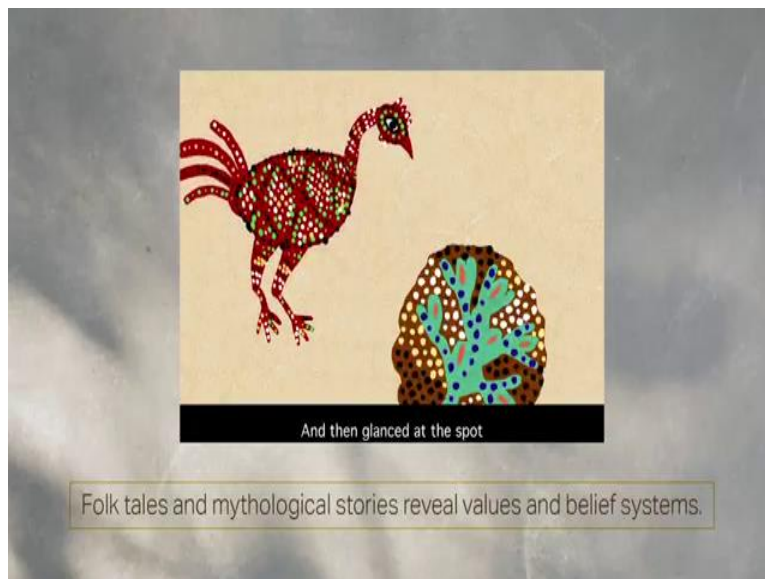
So, we see visual ethnographies often bring fictionalised narratives and mythical stories to create analytical and descriptive presentations of their participants' lives. Instead of compromising the reality or 'truthfulness' of ethnographic representation, we can use forms such as fiction and storytelling, to provide a common ground for communication between the researcher and the audience. Thus making it easier to convey meanings and concepts without falling back on verbal explanations.

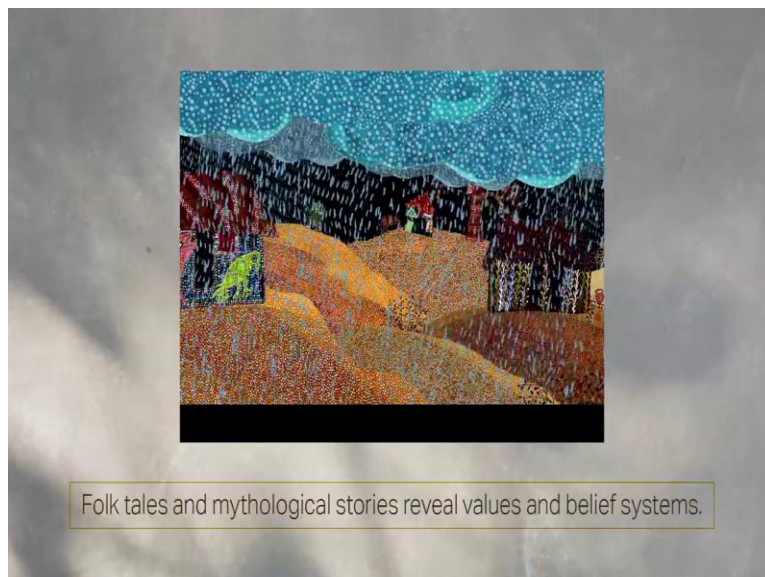
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. In We Make Images, a folk tale, a 'fictional story' becomes an ethnographic film representing the meaning of painting in the lives of the Bhils.

[Video shown 29:07 to 30:17]





The story is set as you may have noticed against a blank background. The blankness represents the 'nowhere' space in which myths and folk tales are situated. The visual medium used here animation film enables such a representation. The conscious exclusion of detail contextualises the myth.

The blank background seems to say that for the Bhils, myths and folktales exist in the mental landscape and are not confined to one particular place or region. These are some of the elements that form the visual language of different media. They are by no means all the elements to use in



constructing visual ethnographies. Our ways of representing can be as varied and unique as our participants' ways of seeing.

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K.P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro are Professors at the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. They are award-winning documentary filmmakers who have worked with community-based, collaborative films since the 1980s.

KP Jayasankar, Anjali Monteiro  
Media teachers, Researchers and Authors  
<http://www.monteiro-jayasankar.com/>



**PUNARVASAN**  
A Document on Reconstruction in Post-earthquake Mozambique  
Film & TV Screenplay 1996  
Directed by K.P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro

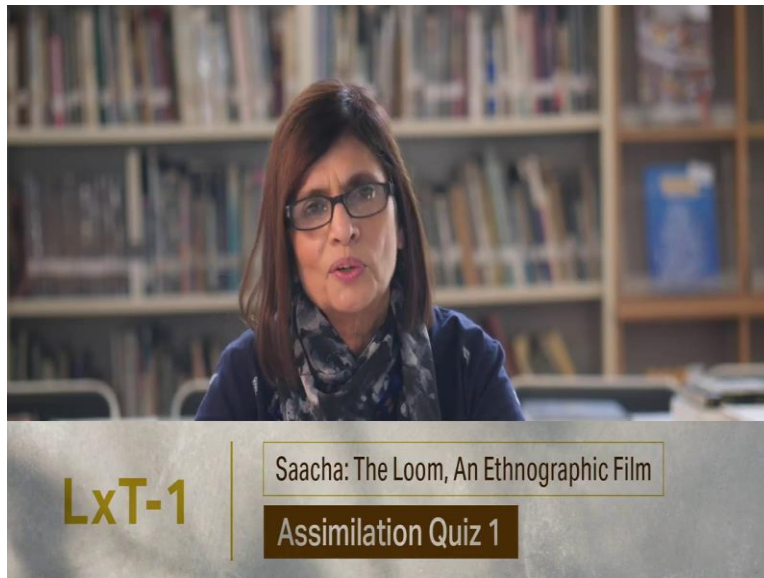
**Saacha**  
The Loom  
Directed by Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar

Public Service Broadcasting Trust  
SO HEDDAN SO HODDAN  
(LIKE HERE LIKE THERE)  
Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar

Punarvasan, 1996

Saacha: The Loom, 2001

So Heddan So Hoddan, 2011



For those of you who may want to explore this subject some more, here is a presentation by Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar. Through our course, we have seen many excerpts from their films and have discussed them. In this presentation, they discuss one of their films, Saacha, The Loom. And at the end of the presentation, there is a quiz that you can take to reflect on your learnings.